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SECSTATE PASS AGRICULTURE ELECTRONICALLY,
BOGOTA PASS APHIS

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SUBJECT: DON'T CALL US, WE'LL CALL YOU: VENEZUELA'S ANIMAL
AND PLANT HEALTH AUTHORITY SENDS STAFF HOME

Classified By: Randall Hager, Agricultural AttachQ, for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: One of President Chavez' July 2008 decrees mandated the reorganization of Venezuela's animal and plant health authority, SASA, into a new organization called INSAI (the National Institute for Agricultural Health). This has now taken operational effect with the first action, for bureaucratic reasons, being to fire all of SASA's approximately 2,000 staff members nationwide. Trade in agricultural products, including from the United States, could be at least diminished, and disease risk for the domestic agricultural sector increased. New initiatives to open trade are expected to go into dormancy. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) According to Dr. Franz Rivas (protect), a veterinarian, consultant to leading livestock companies, and former SASA Director, the changeover from SASA to INSAI has been "a mess" and has halted the organization's operations; even the entity's Caracas headquarters are essentially vacant. COMMENT: This will have a negative impact on Venezuela's ability to control disease in domestic agriculture and imported products. New trade initiatives, including the development of protocols with the United States, are also going to be delayed at best. END COMMENT.

¶3. (C) The Embassy's APHIS Scientist received similar information from his SASA contacts, noting that INSAI does not have a budget, and thus cannot legally maintain staff. According to contacts, it will take about two months for funds to become available. To obtain a position in the new INSAI, staff will likely need to work without pay for that time, though future employment is not guaranteed. Further, all open positions will require an interview and testing before hiring. COMMENT: We do not know what type of interview or test will be required, but given the increased politicization of SASA over the last two years, we believe that some expression of loyalty to the Bolivarian revolution will be required. END COMMENT.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: It has been difficult to move forward on protocols and other initiatives, though we have been able to cooperate on technical issues such as disease prevention and had noted some increased interest in developing science-based trade agreements, as some BRV officials began to realize how trade can help to build the domestic agricultural sector. A lack of staff will delay our ability to move forward on improving trade between our countries, and expected increased revolutionary fervor in the new INSAI could very well harden its position against cooperating with the United States.

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